Final Report
to the U.S. Department of Labor

on the Linking Innovation, Knowledge and Employment Program

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OVERVIEW

The Linking Innovation, Knowledge and Employment (@LIKE) program served 664 disconnected young adults ages 18 to 24 in Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial Counties in Southern California. These young adults were disconnected from school, work and the military and were either low-income, ex-offenders, gang-involved or recently separated veterans. Using a holistic program design approach of wraparound services, the @LIKE project tested strategies to reconnect the disconnected young adults to educational opportunities, employment and community. Specifically, the project was designed to focus on how self-efficacy and resiliency could be measured and reinforced through life coaching. The project utilized trained Life Coaches and the process of providing coaching as a critical aspect of re-engagement and providing support. Finally, the project was designed to test what program elements work best to help these young adults re-engage in school and work.

Vision: All young adults who become disconnected have access to supports and services required to be thriving and poised for successful adulthood.

GOALS

The project met all three of @LIKE’s goals.

- The program goal was that the Consortium creates a replicable service model at the program level that others can learn from and adapt.
  - @LIKE created a replicable service model for other institutions and workforce development areas interested in serving disconnected young adults. The Process Study Report, published in February 2015 by IMPAQ International (IMPAQ), the program’s independent evaluator, serves as a User’s Guide for how to successfully implement a similar program.

- The participant goal was that the array of services and delivery strategies moved disconnected young adults to positive education and/or employment outcomes.
  - The variety of services and delivery strategies helped participants achieve education and employment outcomes. The Impact Analysis found that @LIKE increased the likelihood of obtaining unsubsidized employment by 26.4% and increased the likelihood of attaining vocational training by 14.8%.

- The partnership goal was that the consortium builds a system where Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial Counties collaborate to better serve disconnected young adults.
  - Effective collaboration was attained through consistent management and purposeful leadership, described as a successful qualitative result in IMPAQ’s Process Study and Final Evaluation Report. Internal communication across multiple channels was a key component in aligning processes and procedures across this large regional initiative.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Implemented successful recruitment strategies for this hard to find population. Recruited 675 and enrolled 664 participants in @LIKE.
• Employed innovative engagement strategies so that 311 successfully completed the program.
• Assessed all participants for resiliency and self-efficacy using innovative assessment tools.
• Delivered an average of 13.1 hours of service per week to each participant, which was used to proxy the intensity of service.
• Nearly all participants (98%) received at least some program services, with career exploration being the most popular service at a 90% participation rate.
• 584 participants received work-based learning and other employment services.
• 305 participants earned the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC).
• Trained and certified 14 Life Coaches.
• Delivered an average of 23 hours of coaching to each participant, with the intensity of life coaching services ranging from half an hour to 196 hours.
• Included participants in @LIKE’s strategic planning and governance through a young adult Advisory Council.
• Each site engaged a mix of pre-existing and new partnerships to meet participant needs. For example, Chino Valley Medical Center offered new internship slots to @LIKE participants.
• Developed and implemented a sustainability plan.
• Included participants in @LIKE’s strategic planning and governance through a young adult Advisory Council.

OUTCOME MEASURES

When the grant proposal was written, there was not a lot of research or benchmarks on outcome measures for programs for disconnected young adults, ages 18 to 24. In setting @LIKE’s target goals, the consortium held itself to a high standard.

@LIKE’s enrollment goal was to serve 675 young adults. We came close to meeting that number, enrolling 664 disconnected young adults, ages 18 to 24. Enrollment, along with other target outcome measures and what @LIKE achieved are listed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Goals/Outcome Measures</th>
<th># or % Achieved</th>
<th>Target # or %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Retention in Follow Up Services</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Career Awareness Component</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered Vocational Training Program</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received National Career Readiness Certificate</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received GED/High School Diploma</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attained Unsubsidized Employment</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attained Paid Internship</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved Basic Math Skills (2 grade levels+)</td>
<td>22%*</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved Basic Reading Skills (2 grade levels+)</td>
<td>22%*</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*It should be noted that many participants did not take the basic skills post-tests, as discussed in the Challenges section below. Of those who took the Math post-tests, 61% increased by 2 or more grade levels; of those who took the Reading post-tests, 51% improved by 2 or more grade levels.

While many of the targets were not met, the program’s impacts were substantial, as described in the section below. As an innovation grant, the overarching objective was to learn and extract lessons for
working with the target population. One key lesson was how to set realistic expectations for the outcomes that can be reached with young adults who have been disconnected from work, school and community supports. Other valuable lessons were learned in the process of working toward each goal. These findings are already being applied in WIOA Youth Programs currently offered in the region and have been shared with colleagues around the country at national workforce conferences.

In addition to the performance goals/outcome measures listed in the table above, the Steering Committee set a target of 100 percent customer satisfaction. The program collected customer satisfaction feedback from participants and employers. This information was collected via an anonymous online comment card. Of the 263 participants who filled out a comment card, 99% were satisfied with their overall program experiences. The difficulty in obtaining employer feedback is described in the Challenges section below.

**IMPACTS**

IMPAQ’s Final Evaluation Report contains a full impact analysis and cost/benefit analysis. It was found that @LIKE generated a net benefit of $1,449 per participant, under the assumption of a social discount rate of three percent. IMPAQ noted four major accomplishments during the program’s implementation and operation:

1. @LIKE leadership established an effective strategic planning decision framework;
2. A uniform data collection system was established across all three counties and nine delivery sites;
3. Program staff developed a well-defined role for the Life Coach; and
4. Program enrollment processes were streamlined to facilitate engagement.

Compared with young adults who participated in WIA/WIOA programs in place in the same counties at the same time as @LIKE, the Impact Study found that @LIKE increased the likelihood of program completion by 39.7%; increased the likelihood of obtaining unsubsidized employment by 26.4%; increased the likelihood of obtaining vocational training by 14.8%; and increased the likelihood of obtaining a high school or GED by 4.6%.

IMPAQ noted that one of the program’s key achievements was @LIKE’s ability to reach especially hard-to-serve populations such as those with family responsibilities or with criminal backgrounds. For example, those with family responsibilities participated in education services at a higher rate (54.1%) than the overall participant population (51.2%).

In terms of individual impacts, program participants reported regularly about the effect @LIKE has had on their lives. Numerous success stories were described in each of the quarterly narrative reports. Five of the most impressive successes are included as an attachment.

**KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Summarized below is a description of some key program elements and the lessons learned.

- **Outreach and Recruitment Strategies.** Program staff recruited young adults in places they were known to congregate such as at malls, tattoo parlors, GameStop stores, homeless
shelters, apartment complexes. “Relentless outreach” describes the energy and scope of effort needed to reach disconnected young adults.
  - It takes an intensive “boots on the ground” approach to recruit disconnected young adults who may be couch surfing or homeless.
  - Once the initial cohorts were enrolled, word-of-mouth referrals from participants and their friends were the most effective means of recruiting new participants.

- **Engagement and Retention Strategies.** From early on, the project understood that it is not easy to keep disconnected young adults engaged. The challenges and life obstacles that many disconnected young adults face result in cycling in and out of the program. Their challenges include periodic homelessness, ongoing issues with the criminal justice system, pressures to provide for their families and substance abuse.
  - When participants drop from sight, Life Coaches consistently reached out each week by text, social media messages, calls and home visits to let participants know they could come back at any point once their circumstances changed.
  - It was vital to have a re-engagement tool kit of referrals to mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment and housing assistance.
  - Using cohorts as a way to group and band together participants facilitated positive peer relationships. They often became friends and encouraged each other to stay in the program.
  - Often these young adults do not have good social skills. To keep participants engaged, offer opportunities to enhance interpersonal skills by holding social events such as movie nights, hikes, picnics and outings to museums.

- **Streamlined Enrollment Process.** A key element was the creation and use of a one-page application and self-attestation designed to remove administrative hurdles and make the process as simple as possible for enrollment. Participants were enrolled immediately and had up to 60 days to obtain required documentation such as social security cards.
  - Using simple and rapid enrollment procedures allowed participant engagement the moment the applicant presented for enrollment. A lengthy, complicated application process is a deterrent for disconnected young adults.

- **Assessment Strategies.** All participants completed academic skill and social/psychological asset assessments within the first 60 days of enrolling in the program. However Case Managers had the discretion to have any of the assessments administered later, if they believed taking an assessment would drive a participant away from the program. When appropriate, participants also completed disability and/or mental health assessments.
  - Flexibility in when to administer assessments is a key lesson learned. Young adults who have been disconnected from school often have education trauma and testing can bring on tremendous fears and feelings of lack of self-worth.
  - A high proportion of disconnected young adults have learning disabilities that have been undiagnosed. Budgeting for the cost of disability assessments is crucial. It was life changing for individuals who were assessed and at last had a name for a condition and solutions to overcome the disability.
Many participants were afraid to seek help for mental health issues. Ensure that partners are available to provide mental health services and develop strategies to help young adults overcome any cultural stigmas to take advantage of these resources.

Passing the new online version of the GED test proved to be challenging and intimidating for many disconnected young adults. This test preparation process took longer than it had in the past, so program providers allowed up to a year to complete this component. Some providers enrolled participants in charter schools that specialized in GED preparation.

Setting a target of 100% to achieve the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) was a worthy goal. However, in retrospect we would not have set this at 100%. Not all young adults in the program could attain the level of skill required to become certified. Even with intensive instruction, especially those with learning disabilities or coming to LIKE with third grade reading skills, becoming certified on the NCRC required a high level of reading and math skills. Also, many young adults who obtained jobs during their time in the program did not see the value of taking the test or getting certification, thus they refused to do so.

**Strategies to Sequence Program Components.** Nearly all disconnected young adults were interested in getting a job so that much needed income flowed into the household. That was “the hook” to getting them to enroll. The challenge then became how to convince participants to keep coming back (once they got a job early in the program) to work on other activities leading to stackable credentials so they would be able to progress to an even better job.

- Several sites successfully used stipends to motivate the young adults to complete various components.
- After participants had their work hours cut and saw they could not provide for their family on an entry level salary, some returned to LIKE to attain industry certificates and enroll in vocational training or college.

**Work-Based Learning Strategies.** The program offered a continuum of activities to provide opportunities for participants to connect what they learned in the classroom to the world of work. This continuum included career awareness, exploration and preparation. Participants experienced one or more types of work-based learning experiences in LIKE such as job shadowing, paid work experience, paid internships and on-the-job training.

- Program sites did not utilize paid internships as much as expected. Because many of the young adults got jobs early in the program, Site Directors did not think of using other work-based learning opportunities as a strategy to get an even better job. Internships should be promoted as learning opportunities for all participants, even if the young adult has a job.

**Life Coaching.** The program used trained Life Coaches to promote and help young adults gain resiliency and self-confidence. LIKE required all Life Coaches to be trained and certified through an online training course to learn the 11 Core Coaching Competencies set by the International Coach Federation.
There is no one right way to deliver services to this population. Participants have different learning styles and goals. Using the personality and social/psychological assessment results helped Life Coaches understand how to develop customized services designed to suit the need of each participant.

Case Managers and Life Coaches perform different functions. It is not ideal for one person to take on both roles. One Life Coach commented, “It takes time to develop the habit of connection. The Case Manager might need to pressure participants to complete certain activities, while a Life Coach can meet to just listen, see what’s going on, and support them through coaching. Both roles have tremendous value.”

Other Lessons Learned About Managing a Regional Initiative

- Strong, consistent leadership is vital to a project’s success. @LIKE hired a Project Director with expertise in youth program design and delivery to offer leadership, vision and overall management of the program. A Lead Grant Coordinator carried out day-to-day activities and helped ensure high quality data collection and timely reporting.

- Adopt a leadership system that includes distinct teams, such as a Steering Committee, Grant Coordinators and an Advisory Council of participants to guide the program.

- The Steering Committee’s core purpose was to ensure ongoing learning across the partnership in addressing the needs of disconnected young adults and to find opportunities for continuous improvement to the program design and structure.

CHALLENGES

Below is a summary of some of the key start-up and ongoing challenges the project faced over the last four years.

Contract execution. The timeframe required to complete a local approval process once the grant was awarded was lengthy. It included going through multiple steps with local government, school districts, regional occupational programs and other sub-contractors to complete the procurement process and contract execution. Besides attending to this process, there is not much that can be done to expedite it. Given the negotiations between counties and then between local governments and contractors, with legal reviews at each step, it is recommended that at least six months is allotted to plan and launch regional initiatives. This will allow the full time for service delivery. Two of the three counties allowed program providers to offer services prior to full execution of contracts, however this was not permissible in one county, which delayed the start of program operations at four sites.

Staff turnover. As with all projects of this scope and duration, staff turnover was an issue. More planning for how to replace knowledge and skills as staff left was required. Over the life of the project Life Coaches and Case Managers moved or left their jobs for other opportunities. The organizations in the @LIKE partnership were quick to inform leadership of staffing changes and work together to minimize the effect of turnover. Changes in program staff that had direct contact with customers were treated as a high priority in order to minimize any disruption in service and to ensure that customer needs were met. Research shows that disconnected young adults are particularly sensitive to adults leaving their lives, so care was taken to make the transition as seamless as possible. An onboarding process for Grant Coordinators was developed, since the three county-wide coordinators served as
the key liaison between program provider staff and the Project Director. An ongoing goal was to minimize the loss of program and process knowledge due to frequent staff turnover.

**Employer Feedback.** Despite diligent efforts to obtain employer feedback about the program, only 37 employers filled out customer satisfaction comment cards. The Steering Committee made numerous suggestions about ways to encourage employer feedback, such as taking an iPad to employer worksites to have supervisors fill out the comment card while in the field; however employers remained reluctant to take a few minutes to complete the electronic comment card.

**Difficulties Convincing Participants to Come Back to do Assessment Post-Testing.** Once participants got a job or were in school, many did not want to come back to take the NCRC or complete assessment post-testing. One site developed an incentive program to encourage participants to accomplish goals. For example, participants received a stipend for taking assessment post-tests. An incentive system should be included in programs serving disconnected young adults.

**Travel Geography.** The huge geographic expanse of the three counties in the consortium presented logistical challenges to holding meetings and trainings. For example, the distance between the Apple Valley and El Centro program sites was 195 miles, a 3 ½ hour drive one-way. Many sites had not built in sufficient travel budgets. Wherever possible, a central location was chosen for Steering Committee meetings. Executive leadership in each county supported the importance of attending face-to-face meetings and annual All Partner meetings in order to build rapport and effective partnerships.

**PROMISING PRACTICES**

**Data Management System.** @LIKE used real time data to keep sites apprised of their progress, provide early warnings, identify problem areas and continuously improve quality. @LIKE produced scorecards and a dashboard with site and program level information on a weekly, monthly and quarterly basis. Data-driven decision making proved important in day-to-day operations and for strategic management of key performance indicators.

**Customer Satisfaction Data Collection System.** The protocol for the system to collect customer (participant and employer) feedback was approved by the Steering Committee. Electronic comment cards were collected and sent to Program Managers on a weekly basis and to the Steering Committee on a quarterly basis to help gauge whether the program is exceeding expectations of participants and employers. Suggestions were discussed and incorporated.

**Communication System.** The @LIKE SharePoint web page for partners and stakeholders was the primary internal communication tool, regularly updated with all program information including data reports, meeting minutes, training presentations and materials, policies, forms, monitoring tools, evaluation reports, best practices articles, policies, success stories and Q and A’s.

**File Review/Technical Assistance Process.** The file review process that was implemented in Riverside and Imperial Counties at the start of the project ensured that case files were consistent and complete and that participants met @LIKE’s eligibility criteria. This process was also a learning strategy to identify trends where there was a lack of consistency and/or where WIA rules or procedures were being applied that were not applicable to @LIKE. San Bernardino County followed
its own quality monitoring process with its subcontractors to review eligibility criteria and ensure that documents were placed in the files as specified in the @LIKE Guidelines for Case File Organization.

**New Techniques for Follow-Up Services.** Life Coaches and Case Managers tailored the type of follow-up to each participant’s preference or need. Contacts were made by email, text, phone, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat or house visits. Other participants wanted to come into the office to visit or meet for coffee, so that’s where follow-up connections were made. Some Life Coaches organized outings such as hikes or barbeques to get together. These alumni group activities proved to be an effective way to do follow-up.

**Knowledge Development System.** The program provided a system for ongoing knowledge development through professional development trainings, certificated life coach training, quarterly affinity group forums and distributing best practices articles from national policy and research institutions. All program staff attended professional development trainings on the following topics: an introductory program overview; how to write good case notes; the national career readiness certification; how to recruit disconnected young adults; planning and developing career pathways; and how to interpret and use assessment results. All Life Coaches attended online training certification coursework at Coach U. The quarterly Affinity Group Conference calls for Life Coaches, Case Managers and Program Managers allowed colleagues to exchange information on successes and challenges across program sites.

**New and Enhanced Partnerships.** Program providers developed new and enhanced partnerships to serve disconnected young adults that formed the Partnership Strategy in @LIKE’s Sustainability Plan. Examples of partnerships include the following organizations that offered paid work experience opportunities: San Bernardino County Airports, Imperial Irrigation District, San Bernardino Arts Council, Chino Valley Medical Center, California Steel Industries and a Youth Ecology Corps program offered through Eastern Municipal Water District. Program providers also created meaningful partnerships with community colleges at all sites.

**SUSTAINABILITY**

@LIKE made sustainability planning a part of discussions at Steering Committee meetings from the start. It was determined that sustainability would be approached by thinking through how to sustain key program elements by integrating them into existing funding streams and programs. This differs from the more traditional approach taken by organizations to sustain the program, as is, by approaching funders to continue the existing program model. The leaders of @LIKE understood that this program was designed to test what works and to use lessons to improve how disconnected young adults would be served in all programs. Currently, key program elements are being sustained in the following ways:

- Imperial County is sustaining National Career Readiness Certificate testing at the systems level with this testing now being offered at all Imperial County high schools and at Imperial Valley College;
- Eight out of the nine @LIKE program providers have sustained trained Life Coaches;
- One Riverside County provider builds in an element for disability assessments (since many disconnected young adults miss getting an IEP) in all youth programs offered;
San Bernardino County is sustaining trained Life Coaches at the systems level by requiring certified Life Coaches for all WIOA Youth Program providers; San Bernardino County reduced required paperwork by 13 pages and streamlined required backup documents at the systems level; and Program Managers are applying @LIKE’s recruitment and engagement strategies and lessons learned to work with out-of-school youth in WIOA Youth Programs.

To benefit the three-county consortium, Riverside County EDA will maintain the @LIKE SharePoint site and the @LIKE web site (www.atlike4u.com) that contain resources such as evaluation reports, issue briefs, policies, program design descriptions, the logic model and success stories. This information will be useful to incorporate in grant proposals in order to sustain @LIKE’s key elements in future grant-funded programs.

During the course of this four-year project, many documents and reports were produced. These are listed below and can be accessed at http://www.strumpfassociates.com/reports/atlike-disconnected-youth-project

**DOCUMENTS AND REPORTS**

- Sample Recruitment Flyer
- Sample Referral Form
- @LIKE Eligibility checklist
- One page Program Application
- Income Declaration form
- Life Circumstances Declaration form
- @LIKE Individual Service Strategy form
- Guidelines for Case File Organization
- @LIKE Technical Assistance Monitoring Guide
- @LIKE Case File Review Worksheet
- Sample Policy Guidance Memo (13-06)
- Sample Q and A
- Life Coach Job Description
- Difference between a Life Coach and Case Manager
- 11 Core Coaching Competencies
- Participant Advisory Council Charter
- Facebook Strategy Memo
- @LIKE Steering Committee Charter
- Continuous Quality Improvement Process
- Sustainability Plan
- Process Study
- Issue Brief on Recruitment and Engagement
- Issue Brief on Assessments
- Issue Brief on Life Coaching
- Five Success Stories
- Links to @LIKE videos and website
- Lessons Learned
- Promising Practices